

Heavenly Love on Earth

Matthew 28:16-20

May 18, 2008

I.

Today we celebrate Trinity Sunday. This is the day we recognize a foundational doctrine of the church, the doctrine of God. We venture into the mystery of who God is and what God does. And we see how the Holy Trinity offers God's love to us.

This is not a simple doctrine. But a preacher cannot avoid it just for that reason. And here I'm reminded of the fellow who went to church once a year. It wasn't Christmas or Easter, but Trinity Sunday. He said he really enjoyed seeing the preacher get so confused trying to explain the Trinity.

Hopefully, I can outline the essential parts in an understandable way. And it will be necessary to think outside the box. We must be flexible with our earthly rules of physics that say two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time. In fact, we will disregard our usual understandings of space and time. Finally, we will define "person" differently.

The Catechism of the Church proclaims one God existing in three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (BCP 852). When this sermon is over we will say the Nicene Creed, which is divided into three parts, one each for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In today's Gospel Jesus sent the disciples out to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And the point is that these three persons exist as one God. They are not three gods, and not one person wearing three different hats. The math is a little tricky. You don't go higher than three. But one plus one plus one still equals one.

II.

We can look at the Trinity in two ways. One is to imagine how the Trinity exists "out there," beyond time and space as we understand it. The other is to recognize how the very same Trinity is present in the world "down here," within our time and space and history.

We can think of God in the heavens, somewhere out there where we cannot go during this life. But God also is in the world, down here, with us now, in our lives, and it helps to keep both ideas in context. And we always must remember that God out there and God down here is the same God, the same Trinity, the same three divine persons in one being.

Let's start with the Trinity "out there." This is the context in which we can think about the basic nature of the three divine persons and how they relate to each other on their own, entirely apart from humanity and beyond the physical world. That relationship among them existed before the creation of the universe, and has never changed. We can call this the "internal Trinity" because it focuses on the Trinity within itself. Theologians use Latin words and technical descriptions.

On the other hand, the Trinity "down here" is the idea about how the Trinity, through the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, relates to us, in our lives, in our time, and in the history of humanity. We can call this the "external Trinity." Again, theologians use Latin words and technical terms.

These two aspects of Trinity are important because they distinguish between what the Trinity *is*, and what the Trinity *does*. When considering what the Trinity *is*, we usually envision the internal Trinity "out there," apart from us and the world. But when we consider what the Trinity *does*, our focus shifts to the external Trinity "down here," and how God in three persons affects our lives in ways we experience. As I said, it is the same Trinity, the same God, in either case.

III.

Most of our worship focuses on what the Trinity *does*, as the external Trinity, down here with us. We think of God the Father as creator of the universe we know and can see around us. We think of God the Son as our savior who actually affects us as real people. And we think of the Holy Spirit as the sanctifier who reveals the Father and Son to us in our daily lives. These are things the Trinity *does*, down here, with us; things we can know or experience.

But a more complete understanding also requires us to grasp what the Trinity *is*, out there, apart from us. And we can begin by reflecting on what being out there, apart from us, really means.

First, let's consider time and eternity. We could define eternity as a series of moments in our time stretching out endlessly before us with no end, and as a series of moments stretching endlessly back forever with no beginning.

But if we think about an endless series of moments, we are using the language of time. We are treating time as something that always has existed. It might be more accurate to regard time as something that God created for us, but that never has applied to God. This means that eternity is timeless rather than being a series of measurable moments with no beginning or end.

The significance is that in this sense of eternity, God as Trinity always has existed. There never was a beginning. There is no end. Those concepts are meaningless. God, as the Trinity out there, exists completely apart from time and space even though God also enters our own time and space to relate to us in our own history.

Next, let's consider the concept of a person. We think of persons as separate individuals with separate bodies and centers of consciousness. Each person is unique, and if there are three people in a room, there are three separate people in the room. They do not exist together as one person.

It's different, however, with God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are three separate and distinct, but yet completely united, forms of existence. All three share the same single essence as one Godhead, even though they also are three separate divine beings. Now, our laws of physics say three objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. But we already know that the Trinity exists outside of time and space where earthly rules do not apply.

IV.

It also might help to consider what the Trinity is not. Is there a hierarchy within the Trinity? Is the Father like the rector, the Son like the assistant rector, and the Holy Spirit like the parish administrator? No, they all are co-equal. Even though "down here" they might relate to our faith and worship in different ways, no one has any priority over the other "out there."

We also can ask where the Son and Holy Spirit came from; did the Father exist first, then the Son, and then the Holy Spirit? Again, the answer is no.

Just as the Father always has existed, so has the Son and Holy Spirit. They all are coeternal. This might be counterintuitive, but there are two reasons. First, if the Son and Holy Spirit were created beings then they could not be God because God cannot be created. Second, created beings can change or be changed, and we believe that God does not change. God in three persons always has been God in three persons, and did not become three persons from one person.

Finally, two other errors should be avoided. One is that, the Trinity is not a single being who wears three different hats. This was an early heresy in the church. God is not one person acting at different times as Father the creator, as Son the redeemer, and as Holy Spirit the sanctifier.

Conversely, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not separate beings in the same sense as we are separate beings. We cannot ignore the single being of God and focus on the three divine persons as being independent and not completely united within each other. This was another early heresy, and was equally misleading.

I have heard it said that the Trinity is like water in its three separate states; liquid, steam, and ice. That, however, is the heresy of the three hats I mentioned earlier. All analogies based on the natural world are flawed. The best we could do is to say that the Trinity is like all water everywhere eternally existing simultaneously as entirely liquid, entirely steam, and entirely ice.

So, knowing what the Trinity is not, we can more easily perceive what the Trinity is. And even so, it's important to understand that the nature of God still is surrounded by mystery. We cannot actually *comprehend* God, but *apprehending* God is within our grasp.

Against that background, we can understand the Trinity as having three essential attributes as the Trinity exists "out there," as the internal Trinity.

First, there is one God, consisting of three separate, and fully and equally divine persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, existing as one being.

Second, these persons are coeternal, and have existed throughout eternity past. They have no beginning as we understand that idea, and none of the three was created by the other. This means that Jesus Christ, the earthly Son of God, became incarnate from the eternal heavenly Son that always has existed.

Third, and this is the most complex, they share one essence as one God, and yet are separate beings while remaining undivided. They mutually indwell each other and are bound together by mutual love. Stay with me on this. Each contains the other two, and each permeates and surrounds the other two while also being permeated and surrounded by the other two. I know this sounds a little metaphysical, but I can't think of a better way to say it.

V.

Now, you might ask, "where am I getting all this? Is it in the Bible?" The foundations of the doctrine are indeed in the Bible. In the Old Testament God was revealed in the plural. In the Book of Genesis God said "Let *us* make people in *our* image." (1:26). And the Lord said to the prophet Isaiah "Whom shall I send, and who will go for *us*?" (6:8). There are additional examples.

References to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit also appear throughout Scripture, and sometimes in a single passage or sentence. In today's Gospel Jesus told the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (28:19). Again, there are other examples.

With this biblical background, it was left to the early Church Fathers to interpret Scripture and formulate the doctrine of the coeternal and undivided Trinity of three persons in one being as we have it today. For the most part that work was complete by the end of the fifth century.

VI.

But what does this mean for us today? Why is it important to understand what the Trinity is, out there? Why not just focus on what the Trinity does, down here, and simply recognize that God the Father is made known to us through Jesus Christ as mediated by the Holy Spirit?

Well, it certainly is part of our Christian life to place Christ at the center of our prayers and worship down here. But there is one more aspect as well. It goes to the essence of God out

there, and that essence is love; a selfless, unconditional, and all-giving love that manifests itself through God's grace.

The three persons of the Trinity out there are bound together in this love; in an eternal communion among them that holds them together as one in eternity, and yet also overflows in abundance into creation and our lives.

This eternal relationship of their being has been referred to as the "divine dance." And through grace we are invited join that divine dance, to participate in that love with them in their eternal divine life. We, here on earth, can be part of the essence of what they share in eternity.

VII.

So we see that the Holy Trinity is a complete unity of three in one, expressed in eternal love that abounds among them and extends to us. Through the work of the Trinity down here, we can be transformed by the power of the love they share out there.

And when we allow that to happen, God's heavenly unity will lead us to fulfill God's purpose of earthly unity as the model for Christian living. We can truly love God with all of our being, we can love our neighbors as ourselves, and our lives will be enriched. *Amen.*